2001

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Black Female Protagonists and the Abstruse Racialized Self in Antebellum African American Novels

Elizabeth J. West

Early African American fiction has long been a genre marginalized by unfavorable scholarly commentary. Despite the canonization of American literature, these works were still dismissed as lacking serious literary merit. Well into the twentieth century, leading black scholars would echo dominant literary criticism on the shortfalls of early creative attempts by African American authors. Not until its closing decades would we begin to challenge longstanding notions that these works represent little more than imitation.[1] Yet, a shift has occurred: what was once seen as mere imitation and appropriation of white middle-class sensibilities, at least on the part of nineteenth-century African American women writers, has been argued in works such as Frances Smith Foster's *Written By Herself* (1993) and Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1992) to be, instead, subversive critiques of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Nevertheless, the occlusion of such fiction persists.

Foster and Tate demonstrate that what has been interpreted as appropriation by black women authors can be alternatively argued as their subversion of the prevailing nineteenth-century social discourse of gender and race. They show that many early works dismissed as denigrating and submissive, upon close reading, reveal powerful messages about black empowerment, solidarity, and independence. Arguments maintaining the inferiority of early black fiction are often founded on the misconcep-

tion that these works merely support monolithic or essentialized representations of African American femininity. Yet, just as free and enslaved antebellum black women constituted a heterogeneous population, rhetorics of African American womanhood in antebellum black writings echoed this multiplicity of identities.[2] Not privy to an iconographic black femaleness, early African American writers drafted images of black womanhood through their own imaginations; however, they were not free from the burdens of the racialized language and literary conventions of their times. Thus, contemporary African American scholars and readers must recognize how early black writers, like their literary descendants, did not merely submit to stereotypes, but paradoxically subverted and submitted to the constraints of what Madhu Dubey has called "ideological discourses on race and gender" (412). While scholars often dismiss fictional African American heroines as simplistic and stereotyped, such analyses are rooted in a flawed ontological premise: "The argument that stereotypes misrepresent black feminine identity presupposes a preexistent real and knowable self that fiction should mirror as accurately as possible" (Dubey 414). Although her focus is contemporary black fiction, Dubey's argument helps to unearth the deficiency in criticisms that deem early African American fiction inferior on the perceived notion that these works maintain unreal stereotypes. Just as it is impossible to identify a singular image of the black woman today, it was no less the case in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This heterogeneity has been overlooked in a tradition of critical extremes that find early black-authored works inferior if their black female protagonists are not representative of plantation slaves, or paradoxically, if they are the image of the stereotypical unrefined, uneducated slave woman.

Early black fiction writers were informed by a discourse on race firmly embedded in the nineteenth-century American literary landscape. From Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) to James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), blackness in early American literature, and black femininity in particular, become symbolic with dispossession, alienation, and inhumanity: "From the time that Jefferson's *Notes* was made public, Southern leaders did not hesitate to use his work to strengthen their contention that Negroes were by nature an inferior race . . ." (Franklin 172). The echo of this sentiment in the fiction of antebellum Anglo-Americans is exemplified in James Fenimore Cooper's frontier novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*, which also illustrates the dynamics of race and gender intersections in American literature. Though brave and chaste, Cooper's fictional Cora, the dark sister, seems only fit to sacrifice herself for her fair sister. That Cora's bloodline can be traced to African origins dictates her tragic fate; for, in Cooper's novel, people of color are either annihilated or left at the margins of an emerging and imminent white society. Similarly, while Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is generally lauded for its abolitionist intent, Stowe, like Cooper, reaffirms an Anglo-American dominance of America. Those of mixed racial ancestry find a home outside the nation; and its white households, influenced by nurturing, virtuous white homemakers, supervise and guide the dependent, docile blacks. This is not to say that Stowe fails to offer a picture of black female domesticity: we have this in the form of Aunt Chloe. However, the sentimental language of femaleness is only superficially awarded her. Aunt Chloe is a good housekeeper, but she is not the attractive, fainting, dependent heroine common to this genre. Her loss is traumatic, however; left to care for their children with the realization that she will likely never see her husband Tom again, Aunt Chloe is granted no meaningful moments of reflection. Resigned to her victimization, she is relegated to the superficial existence of slaves that is often constructed in Anglo-American writings (Stowe 168).

The 1850s, the moment of inception for early African American novels, was marked by not only prevailing racialized literary conventions, but also a turbulent social era that conspired on the surface to create a hostile climate for publishing liberatory black female characterizations. Among the most provocative incidences steeped in the national debate on race and slavery were the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, which required the return of fugitive slaves in the north to their southern owners; the 1857 Dred Scott Decision, in which the court denied the plea for freedom by the defendant, Dred Scott, on the premise that he was a slave and not a citizen; and John Brown's 1859 raid on the slave community of Harper's Ferry, Virginia. In addition to these events, a rising influx of European immigrants in the north resulted in a white population that saw free blacks as threats to their employment opportunities. Despite this socially perilous time for blacks, five African American novels were published during this period appropriating the theme, common to slave narratives, of the quest for freedom. Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* (1853), William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), and Martin R. Delany's *Blake* (1859) appropriate the slave narrative form as they trace their protagonists' pressing struggles for freedom from chattel slavery. Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) and Frank Webb's *The Garies* (1857) provide fictional accounts of the racial discrimination faced by blacks in the free North struggling to gain equal access to the labor market and equal treatment under the law.

Less obvious, but pervasive in these antebellum black novels, is the attempt to construct an iconic African American heroine. This quest to assume authorship of black female identity was influenced by the writer's awareness of audience. By the mid nineteenth century, black writers could anticipate a black reading audience; however, significant recognition and financial gain from a work of fiction was confirmed by securing a white one. This meant that while appropriating a liberating medium, early black novelists were, nevertheless, constrained by the reality of an overwhelmingly white and too often hostile public. Even when the white reading public was sympathetic, it was still more often steeped in an ideology of innate white supremacy and an Anglocentric cultural view. Thus, the literary and historical climates faced by these novelists left them affirming black civility, humanity, and gender roles through the lens of a dominant Anglo-American cultural discourse.

There existed, then, an inherent tension in the black writer's attempt to harness this exclusionary language and posit a rhetoric that collapses racial and cultural boundaries. In general, this tension heightened her/his challenge to create substantive black protagonists, and it proved especially precarious in the construction of female characters. The characterizations of Madison Washington

and his wife in Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* (1853) illustrate this point. The contrast between this fictional husband and wife suggests that the liberating power of black antebellum fiction was not so liberating for its black female heroines. As the fictional account of an actual event, *The Heroic Slave* gave Douglass an avenue for greater imaginative and emancipatory expression than his autobiography. While this may be argued for his fictional black male protagonist, the same cannot be said for his female counterpart in this novella.[3]

Douglass describes his hero Madison in details that praise his physical, moral, and mental nature. Of Madison's physical appearance, the narrator says, "His face was 'black, but comely' like the biblical Solomon. His broad mouth and nose spoke only of good nature and kindness" (28).[4] Regarding Madison's character, the narrator reports that "[h]e was just the man you would choose when hardships were to be endured or danger to be encountered, — intelligent and brave" (28). Douglass appropriates the Anglo-American notion of the universal hero to establish Madison's particular heroic character. However, he takes care to leave no question of Madison's unmistakable physical blackness. What he thus achieves is a confirmation of black heroism via black masculinity. He undermines prevailing racial rhetoric by declaring Madison's dark skin, broad mouth, and broad nose as markers of excellence rather than emblems of racial inferiority.

In contrast, though Madison twice refers to his wife by name, he otherwise identifies her in possessive case within expressions of endearment such as "my poor wife," "my good wife," and "my good angel." She is an object, a possession, a voiceless, faceless entity whose indistinct presence ironically validates his own heroic character. Her role becomes clear when Madison explains to an abolitionist sympathizer and friend that he has jeopardized his freedom and been reclaimed into slavery in the interest of rescuing her: " 'On reaching Canada, and getting over the excitement of making my escape, sir, my thoughts turned to my poor wife, who had well deserved my love by her virtuous fidelity and undying affection for me. I could not bear the thought of leaving her in the cruel jaws of slavery, without making an effort to rescue her' " (56). Again, no physical description of Madison's wife is offered, but we are made to understand that she holds those womanly qualities that warrant a man's risking his life. At best, we may infer from Madison's description of her as a house servant that she is likely not of full African ancestry, for it was common practice on plantations to choose blacks of lighter complexion for house laborers.[5] We cannot see her physically, as we see Madison, but we know that she is the ideological icon of nineteenth-century female virtue. Her fidelity and devotion to Madison establishes her as deserving of his sacrifice. That Douglass finds the literary license to identify his hero's black features, but falls short of similar praise for the hero's female counterpart, hints at an uneasiness or imaginative inability to see black and female as representative of beauty. There seems to be no language from which Douglass may draw to speak of African traits in the female sex as beautiful. Madison can be deemed handsome with his broad mouth and broad nose, but this aesthetic is not transferable across gender lines.

This inability to articulate a black female aesthetic is revealed in the second antebellum African American novel, William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter*.[6] Published in the same year as *The Heroic Slave*, Brown's novel differs in that it is a fictional account of a black woman's slave experience. In *Clotel*, Brown weaves the tale of two slave daughters born from the union of Thomas Jefferson and his mulatto servant, named Currer rather than Sally Hemings. (A number of public accusations had been launched against Jefferson, charging that he fathered children by his black servant Sally.) Brown's occasional authorial interventions reveal his aim to show how the evils of slavery extend to some of the finest and most respected white households in America. Through his black female heroines, Brown dismantles the effigy of honorable white male patriarchy, and by increasingly whitening this family of mulatto women with each new generation, he flirts with the notion that race is not so clear a distinction as nineteenth-century discourse would claim. Though absent from the narrative, Jefferson and his misdeed are omnipresent in the form of his offspring, Clotel and her younger sister Althesa, who are white in appearance yet legally black and slaves. As Clotel stands on the auction block waiting for her white lover to purchase her, the narrator captures the paradox of her racial identity. She is described as having a "complexion as white as most of those who were waiting with a wish to become her purchasers; her features as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon; her long wavy hair . . . her form tall and graceful, and her whole appearance indicating one superior to her position" (121).

Similarly, Althesa possesses no outward traits of her African origins. After being separated from Clotel and Currer, she finds herself on the auction block in New Orleans. Like Clotel, she is rescued by a white male admirer who later marries her. At first glance, however, Henry Morton is confused: "In his own mountain home he had been taught that the slaves of the Southern states were negroes, if not from the coast of Africa, the descendants of those who had been imported. He was unprepared to behold with composure a beautiful white girl of fifteen in the degraded position of a chattel slave" (165). It is worth noting that Henry does not refer to Althesa as white-looking, but rather identifies her racially as white. Although the reader knows that Althesa is legally black, that the white Morton sees her as white disturbs the dominant nineteenth-century rhetoric of a clear racial divide.

Such moments of indistinguishable racial determination, constructed through the female protagonists, recur in the novel. This is illustrated later when Clotel and another daughter, Mary, are forsaken by Clotel's lover Horatio Green. Green's angry white wife brings Mary into her household as a servant to leave no doubt about her nonwhite status, but "owing to the fairness of her complexion, she was put to work in the garden out back to darken her skin" (201). Mary's racial abstruseness is further underscored by the black cook's remark that " '[d]ees white niggers always tink dey sef good as white folks' " (201). Here the narrator intervenes to remind us that the cook was black, and that the object of her scorn "was not only white, but she was the granddaughter of Thomas Jefferson" (202).

Brown's racial language persistently challenges dominant constructs of race. He makes distinctions among slaves by skin complexion, but by his novel's end "slave" no

longer means "black," and "mulatto" and "quadroon" are conflated with "white." This slippery discourse is found early in the novel, as the narrator explains: "In all the cities and towns of the slave states, the real negro, or clear black, does not amount to more than one in every four of the slave population" (115). Not much later into the narrative we are told that "[i]n all the large towns in the Southern States, there is a class of slaves who are permitted to hire their time of their owners, and for which they pay a high price. These are mulatto or quadroons, as they are familiarly known, and are distinguished for their fascinating beauty" (118). The narrator's observations suggest that, with miscegenation, blacks in America are evolving into a distinct new racial group, with mulattos making up a class distinguished from the larger slave population.

Throughout the novel, the beauty of the mulatto is acclaimed through the example of the female body, while the larger population of dark-skinned female slaves remains a faceless, noncorporeal entity. This is exemplified by the contrast between Althesa and the slave cooks at the New Orleans auction house. There "is a good-sized kitchen, where two old negresses are at work, stewing, boiling, and baking, and occasionally wiping the sweat from their furrowed and swarthy brows" (139). Contrasting these two laboring black women is "the beautiful Althesa, whose pale countenance and dejected look told how many sad hours she had passed since parting with her mother in Natchez" (139). Her slave status aside, Althesa is the picture of nineteenth-century sentimental femininity. She is an undeserving victim whose plight is more horrible in light of her respectable and noble ancestry. She is the product of exceptional parents, she is educated, and she is most notably the sentimental picture of female frailty and emotional sensibility.

While black women are once again enigmatic fictional entities, black male heroes in *Clotel*, whether black or mulatto, are clearly defined. The slave William, who assists Clotel in her escape, is "a tall, full-bodied negro, whose very countenance beamed with intelligence" (213). We find no such female parallel. The mulatto slave George is "as white as most white persons. No one would suppose that any African blood coursed through his veins. His hair was straight, soft, fine, and light; his eyes blue, nose prominent, lips thin, his head well formed, forehead high and prominent" (262). Both William and George exemplify the racialized extremes of blackness, but both are also physical and mental representations of the heroic. While the dark-skinned William will exit the story after he assists Clotel in escape, the mulatto George will prove central by the novel's end. It is he who marries Mary, the only remaining descendant of the Jefferson-Currer union. The white-looking Mary and George assume white identities and live in Europe, where they can assimilate into the white population.

In Europe, Mary can shift comfortably and confidently into the role of middle-class femaleness that her generational predecessors could not secure. She can now become the dependent, fragile, middle-class woman tucked away in the confines and security of her domestic place. Perhaps it is because Mary is generations removed from an African identity that Brown grants her this social station. Bound by a dominant discourse on femininity that aligned ideal womanhood with the presumed fragility and vulnerability of white women, he is unable to transpose this image onto the widely accepted, contrasting image of black women. Moreover, the prevailing mid-nineteenth century American discourse on ideal womanhood was inextricably tied to female sexuality. Chastity was presumed woman's inherent nature: a woman's sexual purity could be taken only respectably in marriage. That marriage among slaves was not recognized as legally binding left slave women always outside the boundaries of worth and respectability. This social alienation is played out in *Clotel:* unions between white men and women of apparent or known black ancestry cannot stand against legal or social challenges. It is only after generations of whitening, as in the case of Mary, that a woman of African descent is freed from the legacy of black female sexuality.

In his *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), Frank Webb goes beyond simply problematizing dominant race discourse. Although he centers on the lives of the biracial Garies family, Webb constructs black characters of undeniable African origin that play compelling roles in shaping the novel's outcome, and blackness becomes the site at which he locates the exceptional humanity and achievements of African Americans. He does not succumb to the common practice of re-inscribing white superiority with whiteness masked as blackness. Rather, anticipating twentieth-century novelists of black communities such as Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman, Ernest Gaines, and James Baldwin, his African American characters are icons of respectability because they are tied to a legacy of black struggle and achievement, not simply because they can perform whiteness. He makes blackness the site of social and cultural wholeness, and he cements this impression with his polarization of the Garies siblings.

The orphans Emily and Clarence Garies "show no trace of African origin" (2). Until they are discovered to have a mulatto mother, their northern schoolmates presume that they are white. When one sibling (Clarence) assumes a white identity and the other (Emily) a black one, Webb suggests the triumphant nature of African American community and society. The black sibling, Emily, finds happiness, place, and identity. Clarence, the white sibling, on the other hand, gains none of these; and the terrifying and alienating white world finally drives him to his death.

Emily offers a significant contrast with Mary of *Clotel.* On the surface, both appear white: Emily has chestnut hair and blue eyes like her father (2). When she reaches adulthood, "[h]er hair has a slight kink, is a little more wavy than is customary in persons of entire white blood; but in no other way is her extraction perceptible, only the initiated, searching for evidences of African blood, would at all notice this slight peculiarity" (337). However, after Mr. and Mrs. Garies die, friends decide that the black Ellis family will raise her, and a white one will rear her brother Clarence. The paradox here is that it is the darker Clarence who is granted whiteness and the fairer Emily who becomes black. Gender considerations influence this decision: Clarence will grow to be a man who will have to make his own way in the world and provide for his family. He has been awarded whiteness because it is the more secure ticket to economic opportunity and security. Emily, in comparison, will grow to be a woman who will be provided for, thereby gaining nothing by assuming a white identity. Webb thus suggests that the benefits of

whiteness are economic and political – blacks choose to do so for social mobility and to avoid the discrimination they would otherwise face.

He also demonstrates that middle-class female virtues can be passed successfully along African American as well as white family lines; it is the nurturing and unmistakably black women of the Ellis household who teach Emily. Unlike Mary in *Clotel*, who assumes a white identity at the close of the novel, Emily, the last of the Garies, establishes her home in the black Philadelphia community that has nurtured her. And her marriage to Charlie Ellis confirms her racial identity. That Emily is white in appearance may lead readers to dismiss *The Garies* as just another antebellum novel that appropriates a whitened female character to give subjectivity to black female experience. Yet, the care that Webb takes to construct the Ellis women through a middle-class discourse on feminine virtue and domesticity, and then to establish them as the models of womanhood that mentor Emily, speaks to his mission of centering black women at the source of their female traditions. Webb lays the blueprint for contemporary characterizations of black women and community that African American women authors such as Tina Ansa, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshall continue to develop.

Martin R. Delany follows Webb in writing a fictional work that highlights racial consciousness, and like Webb, he creates a female protagonist whose racial identity is not as clearly marked as that of her male counterpart. Delany's *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1859) has as its central character an African male of unmistakably African descent. The hero, Blake, is as "black — a pure Negro — handsome, manly and intelligent, in size comparing well with his master, but neither so fleshy nor heavy built in person. A man of good literary attainments . . . . he was bold, determined and courageous, but always mild, gentle and courteous" (16-17). Like Madison of *The Heroic Slave*, Blake is unapologetically black and handsome, and his handsomeness exceeds that of his white master. Delany reveals here a literary imagination that negates the prevailing rhetoric of white superiority and instead legitimizes the black male hero as humane — and exceedingly so. His Blake is the iconic nineteenth-century male hero — handsome, intelligent, moral. He will mastermind the formation of a black freedom movement and unite the masses of blacks in an uprising to overthrow their masters and end slavery.

Blake's wife, Maggie, is of mixed racial ancestry: she is described as a "dark mulatto of a rich, yellow, autumnlike complexion, with a matchless, cushionlike head of hair, neither straight nor curly, but handsomer than either" (6). As with Douglass in *The Heroic Slave*, Delany falls short of imagining a female hero in the likeness of a "pure" black. Blake is a pure Negro, but the abstruseness of his wife's identity is symbolized in the description of her hair, which again is "neither straight [like the hair of whites] nor curly [like that of blacks]." The emblem of her racial identity, it is "handsomer than either" that of whites or blacks. Maggie is thus white, yet not white; black, yet not black. Delany denies her the clear racial identity that he awards the male hero, Blake. He cannot give voice to a female aesthetic of purely African origin and falls back on the stock female mulatto heroine. But Delany's fall is not one altogether. His description of Maggie, while not affirming a black femaleness, neither reinforces the dominant rhetoric that normalizes female beauty as whiteness.

It is the struggle to resist a prevailing rhetoric of white superiority that highlights Harriet E. Wilson's 1859 autobiographical novel, *Our Nig*.[7] At its very heart is her attempt to show that things are not as they seem, and her protagonist, Frado, demonstrates this. She is black and not black, and this indeterminacy underscores the arbitrary assignment of racial identity in America. Wilson undermines prevailing signifiers of race and uncovers both the ambiguity of a discourse that marks Frado as black and the ambiguity of rhetorics of whiteness. Frado is biracial through the uncommon union of a white mother and a black father. Also noteworthy is the low social status of Frado's mother, Mag. That Frado's father Jim is black certainly determines the limitations of her social place in the antebellum north that is her home, but Mag, who has fallen to sexual indiscretion and been outcast from the community before Frado is born, leaves her a shameful legacy. It is instead Jim who provides Frado some familial link to human decency. His protective, caring nature leads him to rescue Mag from starvation when she has been ostracized from the respectable white community, and he looks after her and their two children until he falls ill and dies. Then, Mag decides that no one will voluntarily take the "black devils," so she soon abandons her offspring (16). Her vision of Frado as a black devil is puzzling, given her maternal link to the child and the narrator's description of Frado as a "beautiful mulatto, with long, curly black hair, and handsome, roguish eyes, sparkling with an exuberance of spirit almost beyond restraint" (17). In part, this vision reveals Mag's negation of Frado's white heritage — mixing black and white makes black.[12] The evil mistress, Mrs. Bellmont, also presumes that Frado's African ancestry negates any white inheritance. However, Mrs. Bellmont must validate her premise by putting Frado to work in the sun to darken her and later cutting her hair to make her less attractive (39, 70).

On the surface, Wilson seems to buy into the white supremacy rhetoric that marks black as evil, but the novel offers clever moments that can also be seen as a backlash to this rhetoric. One example is the representation of Mrs. Bellmont as a she-devil whose brutal acts toward Frado fall far short of middle-class New England womanhood (17, 22). And at the death of Mrs. Bellmont's daughter, Mary, racial signifiers are shifted as Frado imagines Mary in hell. Frado asks, "'S'posen she goes to hell, she'll be as black as I am. Wouldn't mistress be mad to see her a nigger!'" (107). The white Mary, in death, has been racially transformed. If blackness is evil, it will claim all who are evil. As Frado's story closes, the novel gives another glimpse at the indefiniteness of Frado's racial identity. Living in a Massachusetts town in search of financial livelihood, she considers the business of making straw hats. In the passage that recalls this period in her life, the conflicting language of race once again emerges: "But how could she [Frado], black, feeble and poor, find any one to teach her. But God prepares the way, when human agencies see no path. Here was found a plain, poor, simple woman, who could see merit beneath a dark skin; and when the invalid mulatto told her sorrows, she opened her door and her heart, and took the stranger in" (124). In this short passage three racial markers are used to describe Frado: "black," "dark skin," and "mulatto."

Frado, who was so light that Mrs. Bellmont worked her outdoors to better mark her as black, is now observed to be dark-skinned. And though black, she is still mulatto, which again identifies her as part white. With this shifting racialized language, *Our Nig* never allows the reader to feel certain about race as a reliable construct.

Wilson and her four contemporaries stand out for their pioneering fictional explorations into the instability of nineteenth-century rhetorics of race and identity. Their novels illustrate how early black writers manipulated constructs of femininity to undermine prevailing racial discourses. Contrary to charges that early African American novelists surrendered black womanhood to dominant racial paradigms, these works suggest that they were eking out a language to express black female humanity and a black female aesthetic. Their problematic treatment of the African American female protagonist reveals a fictional tradition that at its beginnings found it more difficult to construct a liberating language for women than for men. But this imaginative void was not an impenetrable space. It was/is an obstruction to the imaginative process that black authors were/are dismantling.

Scholarship focusing on early black fictional works has not yet matched the volume of criticism on the slave narratives. Filling this void will broaden our historical and aesthetic understanding of the African American novel. In particular, representations of black womanhood in these works can help us retrace the literary evolution of the black female protagonist and further appreciate these early fictional treatments of African American heroines as manifestations of the search for imaginative freedom. It is a freedom sought through a medium that subjugates and liberates. Writers often risk losing their intended messages through language whose meanings may shift somewhere between the speaker and the listener. Yet, language is presumed an instrument of empowerment: "[o]ne's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse" (Bakhtin 348). If Bakhtin's notion of the novel's liberating capacity is accurate, then at the very least we can appreciate early African American characterizations of black womanhood as the wellspring of the legacy of the black novelist's struggle to transform a language of negation into the discourse of self-affirmation.

Notes

[1]In her 1895 address, "The Value of Race Literature," Victoria Earle Matthews maintained that blacks had yet to distinguish themselves in literature. Twentieth-century works such as W.E.B. Du Bois's "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), Robert A. Bone's *The Negro Novel in America* (1965), and Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s *Black Literature in America* (1971) reverberated with this unflattering assessment of early black fiction. Although Baker argued in *Black Literature* that "no black American literature of merit was produced in the first 280 years of the black man's history in the United States" (3), he shifts from this position in his more recent works.

[2]Historical discussions on the heterogeneity of slave women populations can be found in works such as John Blassingame's *Slave Testimony* (1977), Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* (1981), Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter* (1984), Jacqueline Jones's *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (1985), Gerda Lerner's *Black Women in White America* (1972), and Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I A Woman* (1985).

[3]Given Douglass's flat characterizations of black women in his 1847 *Narrative*, his treatment of them in *The Heroic Slave* is not altogether striking. The wife of Douglass's fictional hero, Madison Washington, is as obscure as Douglass's own real life partner as he presents her in his autobiography. Douglass informs readers that upon securing his freedom, he promptly went to work to support himself and his new wife — a wife whose insignificance is made evident by his failure to name her (150).

[4]Describing Madison as dark-skinned with broad nose and mouth, Douglass appropriates the dominant discourse in nineteenth-century America that drew clear lines of racial distinctions highlighting these physical traits as African. It is this racialized rhetoric that I will at other moments in this paper refer to as African features, in keeping with the rhetoric of nineteenth-century America that informed public discourse on race.

[5]For further discussion on intraracial distinctions in the slave community, see Eugene Genovese's section on "Miscegenation" (pp. 413-31), in his 1976 publication, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made.*

[6]*Clotel* was published in four editions. In all instances I refer to the first edition, published in London in 1853.

[7]By its very title — *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North. Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There* — this novel challenges dominant nineteenth-century discourses on race. "Nig" is an abbreviation of the racial slur "nigger" that is in general a derogatory term, but also more specifically calls on a racialized language of slavery. With the possessive pronoun, "Our," that precedes "Nig," Wilson conjures images of slavery — the possession of one human by another. Following this with the contrasting reference to Nig as a free black in the north, Wilson is clearly critiquing the image of that region as the land of freedom for blacks. Wilson's long satiric title hints at the overall satiric tone of the novel. The novel reveals the northern hypocrisy that is revealed through the difference between its claims of freedom and its actual treatments of blacks. Frado is not a chattel slave, but against her will she is made to labor, without pay, for her master.

[8]The notion that any "drop" of African blood makes one black echoes an accepted racial sentiment in nineteenth-century America. See F. James Davis's *Who Is Black?* (pp. 4-6, 31-50) for a historical discussion on the "one drop rule."

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SoundTrack

Jcherry Muhanji

————The Call————-

When John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" entered the world I was a wife, mother, daughter, and sister — all the "favorite things" of the patriarchy. The intersection of his music with those roles became "when and where I (could) enter"[1] creative space. I realized I "hadda" place. How and by what means would I get there?

In retrospect, the persistent roaring of my husband, "git that shit offa the record player," still surprises me. How could he, as a musician and male with all the credentials that afforded him, not hear what Coltrane was *saying* while I could? "My Favorite Things" put a tear in patriarchal space and I could feel that "freedom comin' on down the line." Just like that old spiritual says, "it won't be long now, chile." I was wrong. It would take years for me to discern what Trane's *invitation* was all about.

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I knew without knowing that there was a place for me inside of his music — a place where women could be as naturally together as men were. Perhaps it needed to be wedged open, but the passion, meaning, and mystery within his music were calling me. Though the clarion call was clear I was not, but the first hint came in Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens":

> *They (our foremothers) dreamed dreams that no one knew — not even themselves, in any coherent fashion — and saw visions no one could understand. They wandered or sat about the countryside crooning lullabies to ghosts, and drawing the mother of Christ in charcoal on courthouse walls. (232; parentheses are mine)*

The complexity of passion — the one form it took (not possible for my foremothers) was the social movements of the '60s, '70s, and '80s. There would be more complexity and more passion, but for now as their progeny my part of the puzzle lay buried in their "unexplained visions" and "dreamed dreams".

Just at the edge of my consciousness — at the periphery of my vision — something stirred, but when I turned to face it head on, it slipped away. Like in a dream where the ego/self lies dormant while the dreaming self takes off. Only the symbols, presences, and fragmentary images that "people" the dreaming landscapes were invading my days as well as my nights. In one night dream my consciousness shifted into descending light — filtering from gray, to dark, to deep shadow, cutting diagonally across one half of the faces of women I have known and those I will. I felt joy and desire as that light — erotic "flickerings" reminiscent of the old two-reelers — as light played out scenes, not on a movie screen, but on the bodies of naked women! — followed closely by the "me," jerking to the strains of organ music as the grinding sound of the moving camera continued. My heart was in my throat as I joined with women gliding in and out of rhythms, not our own. Still aroused I hear a music — hot music— that "frames" the women in wrap-around sound, but as it does they are all changed. Though still naked we all wear bobbed hair with the stems of long cigarette holders in our heavily lipsticked mouths never missing a beat — finishing the Tango and onto the Charleston. (That image of dance, women, hot music, and me would eroticize the narrative in my creative work, [more on that later], my research, and finally this piece).

In pondering the "flapper" dream I somehow knew that cinematic images — because of their power to persuade, entertain, educate, and